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THE ORIGIN OF IROQUOIS SILVERSMITHING

By ARTHUR C. PARKER

DURING the middle of the eighteenth century there was a distinct change in the character of Iroquois personal ornaments. Then for the first time records mention silver articles such as buckles, crosses, crowns or bands, bracelets, and earrings, but no detailed description of the exact character and patterns of these objects has been left us. Previous to 1700 the metallic ornaments of European origin of the Iroquois had been principally of pewter, iron, brass, and sometimes copper. At the beginning of the eighteenth century silver ornaments were introduced and by the time of the French and Indian war they had become fairly common. At this time Indian favors could not be purchased with trinkets of brass, and the French and English, each eager for trade and prestige, began to shower silver ornaments upon the eastern aborigines until their shirts are sometimes described as being so thickly covered with them that they looked like armor. Some families are said to have had a bushel of brooches.

Specimens of Iroquois silverwork have for twenty years or more attracted the attention of collectors of Indian relics. Few articles, unless we except the historic wampum belts, have been more eagerly sought for. Up to about 1865 these silver articles were fairly abundant, native silversmiths supplying the demand where the old trade ornaments could no longer be had.

Perhaps the first specimens of native made Iroquois silver ornaments obtained for any museum were those collected by Lewis H. Morgan for the New York State Cabinet (Museum). Unfortunately,

however, the Morgan specimens are not now accessible and have not been seen in the State Museum collections for many years. Mrs Harriet Maxwell Converse in 1897 collected and donated to the Museum a series of Iroquois silver brooches, beads, head-bands, bracelets, and earrings, and described them in the 54th Annual Report of the State Museum. The Converse collection of silver articles was the first exhibited in the State Museum ethnological collections since the Morgan collection, and Mrs Converse's description is one of the first detailed accounts known to the writer. Earlier notices, which are numerous, mention the articles by name only. Later Dr W. M. Beauchamp prepared a monograph on the "Metallic Ornaments of the New York Indians," published as *Bulletin* 73 of the State Museum, this being the most extended and detailed account of the objects themselves so far published. The next account of the subject came from the pen of Mr M. Raymond Harrington under the title "Iroquois Silverwork," published in vol. I of the *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*. Mr Harrington's paper is by far the most satisfactory so far in print since it describes, not only the various classes of ornaments, but gives an account of the tools used by the Iroquois in the manufacture of silverwork and also describes the method. In this respect his article was the pioneer of its kind.

The first set of Iroquois silverworkers' tools collected for a museum was seemingly that obtained by Mrs Converse for the Richmond collection in the museum of the Montgomery County (N. Y.) Historical Society. Mr Harrington secured two outfits in Canada.

During the autumn of 1907 the writer was informed by a number of Indians from the Allegany Reservation that there was a silversmith's outfit of tools in the possession of Silversmith George, an old Seneca Indian living near Tunesassa on the Allegany river. Knowing the extreme rarity of such tool kits, an immediate effort was made to secure it. Smith George was visited and the outfit purchased for a few dollars. It was incomplete, but at the time the State Museum had not a single Indian silverworker's tool. As much information was obtained as could be imparted by Mr George, whose deceased brother had been the real skilled worker. During

the summer of 1908 another outfit was located on the Cattaraugus Reservation. It was in the possession of Mrs Nancy Mohawk and was purchased through the good offices of Chief Delos Big Kittle, known to his fellow tribesmen as Chief Soinowa. This outfit was complete except for the brass patterns which had been loaned to a son-in-law. It was promised that they would be restored for a few dollars more and added to the outfit already in hand, but they could not be found when sent for.

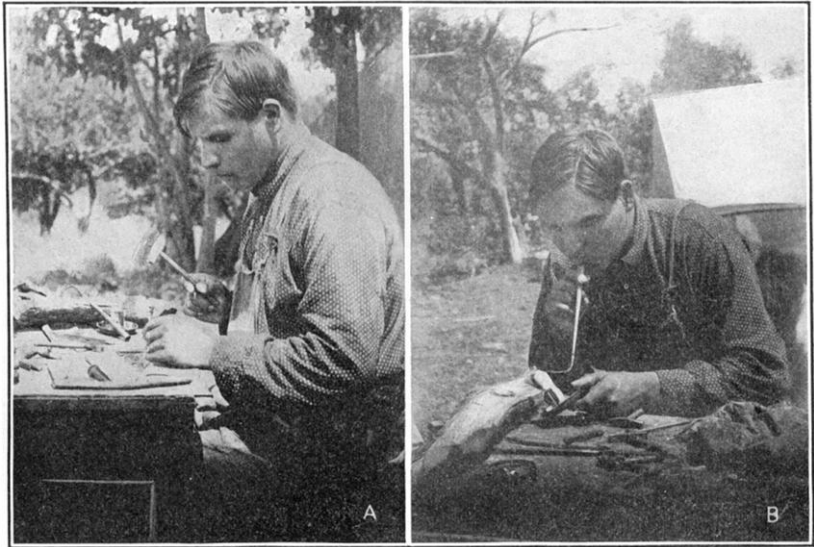


FIG. 34.—A Seneca silversmith at his work table. In *A* the silversmith is cutting out a star brooch, and in *B* he is melting a lump of silver by blowpiping a candle flame upon it as it lies in a hollow in a wooden block.

The outfit as it stood (see fig. 34) consisted of an old stained pine table with a drawer which had been partitioned off to contain the various tools which consisted of more than a hundred chisels, several homemade saws fashioned from case knives, a blowpipe, a candlestick, hammers, pincers, a small table vise, punches, dies, awls, gravers, files, etc., and several boxes of silver cuttings, chips, brooches in process, earrings in process, glass in various stages of the shaping process for mounts, etc. A small partition contained several flint drills and a flint graver, also eight pieces of flat deer bone in process of manufacture into gaming buttons.

As in the case of the outfit procured the previous year, as many data as the Indian owners could furnish, prompted by vigorous questioning, were secured. Questions which might suggest answers were not asked in any instance, this being a better method to employ when interrogating Indians unaccustomed to analytical studies, and who many times will acquiesce in a suggested reply.

Several photographs were taken showing the uses of the various tools. Experiments were conducted in die stamping, graving, and melting silver by blowpiping a candle flame upon the metal held in the hollow in a piece of hard wood. The silver melted, fused, and with the withdrawal of the flame hardened into a small button.

Most writers on the subject have had little to say regarding the origin of the art of silversmithing among the Iroquois and other tribes that used similar ornaments. This is especially true of the class of articles known as brooches. Mrs Converse says that she failed to find in illustrations of jewelry ornamentation of the French, English, or Dutch designs that have been actually followed in the hammered coin brooch of the Iroquois. "I credit him with entire originality," she adds. This is true perhaps as far as concerns the chasing of the brooch. Dr Beauchamp thought the brooch apparently an evolution of the gorget and says that it is difficult to surmise how the buckle-tongue fastening originated, or, if borrowed, whence it came. Mr Harrington notes that the heart and crown brooch looks suspiciously European.

That an art of this character should spring suddenly into existence seems improbable, and especially since the Iroquois had nothing resembling the brooch prior to the colonial period. The writer therefore sought to find what the early trade ornaments of silver had been and to trace if possible any connection between the designs of such and the ornaments made by the Iroquois. A little research led the writer to take the stand that the idea of making silver ornaments such as brooches and earrings of the class under discussion had its origin in Europe and not in America. An examination of the archeological investigations in England, and especially in Yorkshire, revealed the fact that the builders of the burial cairns in Britain used the circular brooch with a tongue fastener, in all essential respects similar to the earliest type of brooches used by the Iroquois and other eastern Indians. This led to further investigations which re-

sulted in the discovery that the "Iroquois brooch" was in reality of Scotch or at least of British origin, and that brooches of silver, many types of which are similar to Indian-made varieties, were known in Scotland as "Luckenbooth brooches."

Dr Joseph Anderson, Curator of the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh, in reply to the writer's inquiries, said, "I think that nearly all of these [brooches] figured in the plates of the pamphlet you kindly sent me are imitations and adaptations of Scotch Luckenbooth brooches, so called because they were chiefly

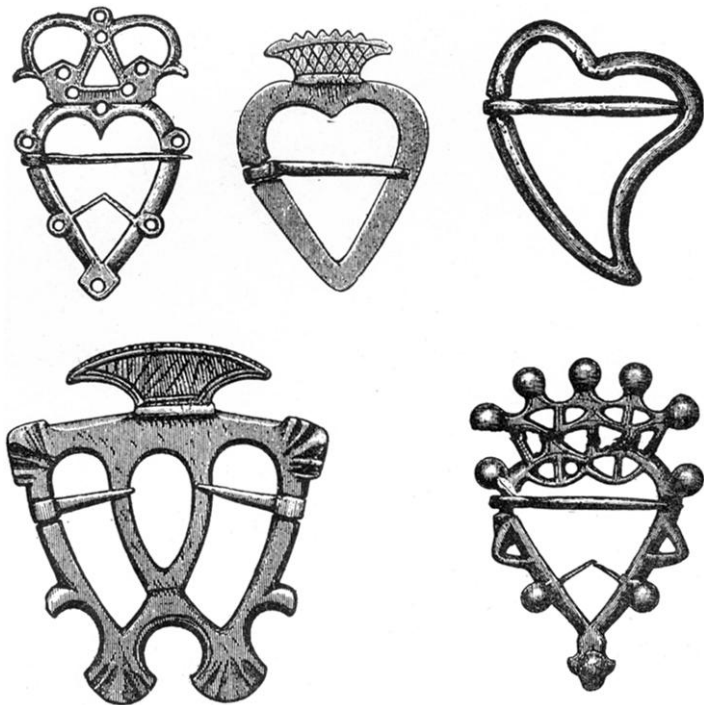


FIG. 35.—Scotch Luckenbooth brooches, heart motif (actual size).

sold in the Luckenbooths around about St Giles Church, Edinburgh. This applies to all those modeled on the design of a single or double heart, crowned, and also to the simpler forms of the heart alone. The Masonic badges seem also to have been imitated, but they need not necessarily have been Scottish." Dr Anderson enclosed with this letter a few leaves torn from the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Feb. 12, 1900, pp. 220-222, which have illus-

trations of Scotch Luckenbooth brooches. For comparison these illustrations are reproduced in figs. 35 and 36. To a second letter of inquiry Dr Anderson replied: "The earliest period for the manufacture of the heart-shaped and other shapes of the Luckenbooth brooches is a matter of inference and may be 17th rather than 18th century. . . . They were worn by women and children in the fastening of a bodice or collar. . . . There are no distinctive names given to

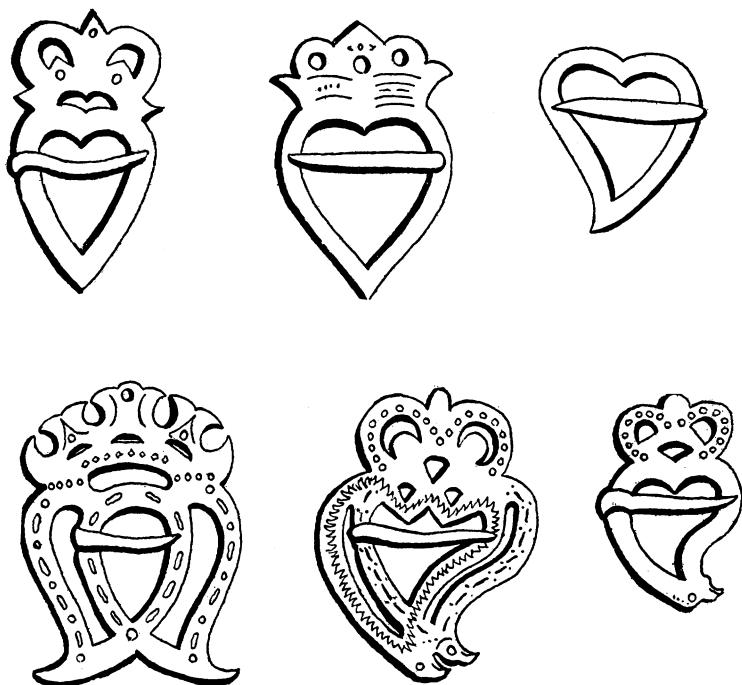


FIG. 36.—Iroquois silver brooches, heart motif (actual size).

the various types of these brooches. They were mostly used as luck tokens, or betrothal gifts, and the choice of the heart shape or the crowned heart or the double heart for these purposes is sufficiently obvious. Moreover they frequently bear inscriptions, initials, or posies; for instance on one in the museum is the inscription 'Wrong not the — whose joy thou art,' the blank for the word heart being supplied by the form of the brooch itself. There are no sets of tools, dies, or punches for making brooches in the museum. I never heard or saw any such."

It seems conclusive, therefore, that the Iroquois brooch and other silver ornaments that became popular during the early colonial period are of European origin, specifically perhaps Scotch. We say *perhaps* for lack of definite information as to the possible use of brooches elsewhere except in Great Britain. Archeology forbids the presumption that Europeans copied brooches from the Indians and sent them back as trade articles.

White jewelers in the United States and Canada for more than a hundred years have made brooches, hat-bands, earrings, and arm-bands to sell to the Indians. These jewelers also made brass patterns which were sold or traded. Some of these were made in Montreal and others in Albany. The Frederick Mix firm of Albany only recently sold their old dies and patterns to a junk dealer by whom they were destroyed before the writer could procure them.

Some of the die-cut brass patterns are still to be found, but no complete set has ever been collected. In using them the pattern was laid on a sheet of beaten silver, the design traced on with an awl, and the pattern cut out with suitable chisels and gouges of steel. The art is now almost obsolete, few silver articles having been made during the last twenty years.

The writer first called attention to some of these facts in the 5th Report of the Director of the N. Y. State Museum, 1909, and also in an address before the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society, Wilkes-Barre, in describing a fine example of Scotch brooch in the collections of that society.

The chief reason why the European origin of Iroquois brooches was not suspected by collectors is that no detailed description or picture of the trade brooch was ever made. When it was thought worth while to collect them the Iroquois had forgotten their European origin and steadfastly asserted that they had always made them, even though they might for the sake of convenience get white jewellers to cut their patterns or even stamp out blank brooches which they afterward chased in their own fashion. The Seneca even have several legends about brooches, one of which tells of a great silver mine in the Alleghanies and another that the shining ornaments are the scales of an under-water fish-man who loved a maiden and lured her to his lake each day by a gift of a scale until they became a charm that drew her into the water and to her lover.

When inquiries were made by ethnologists none thought to seek out the white jewellers who had had a hand in the manufacture of brooches and other Indian silver trinkets because he could not find the jeweller or thought little about the matter. The British



FIG. 37.—Tools used by Iroquois silversmiths. There are about 150 chisels, awls, gravers, punches, and other tools in the kit from which these are selected (New York State Museum collection).

traders had ceased to trade their silver ornaments and their true origin was not suspected. The Indians wore them, made them, and had tools (see fig. 37) and smiths for their manufacture. The natural conclusion was that Iroquois silverwork was of native origin.

The principal difference between the Iroquois brooch and its Scottish prototype is that the Iroquois decorated theirs on one flat surface with dots and dashes, wavy lines, sun, moon, and star symbols, life and "seed" signs, and cut animal-head profiles in projecting points or tips of some of the heart and crown forms. They even sought to interpret the symbolism of the European designs. The heart and crown brooch, "Queen Mary's heart," was called "the owl" and was worn as a charm at night. The masonic emblem was conventionalized again and again until the original motif is hardly to be distinguished. In its various stages of conventionalization it was given various names, such as "sky and pillars" and "council fire." Some collectors, however, have been unable to discover any symbolism, and attribute any interpretation to the imagination of the collector. As a matter of fact the Iroquois do have certain symbols on their brooches, and some of these have been interpreted by one or two old Indians for the writer who has every reason to believe his information authentic.

In brooches of Scottish origin the decoration of the form is by embossing, deep ridging, and beveling. Scotch brooches seem thicker and consequently more solid, when contrasted with the rather thin and flat brooches of the Iroquois. Scotch brooches are sometimes decorated on both sides and have inscriptions in Roman text on them. There may be other differences in Scotch brooches, but the writer has not seen enough of them to justify further conclusions.

Dr Anderson thinks the Scottish brooch originated in the 17th century, but a cursory examination of *Forty Years' Researches in British and Saxon Burial Mounds of East Yorkshire*, by J. R. Mortimer (London, 1905), will show that the circular brooch of bronze and silver dates back to the time of savagery, and they were probably never obsolete at any period in the history of Great Britain. Their use and manufacture by the Indians of America furnishes a splendid illustration of the postulate that similar artifacts were made by or were capable of delighting any people of a similar cultural stage.

NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM,
ALBANY, N. Y.